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**From Capabilities to De-growth:  
Toward A New Concept of Global Justice**

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This paper examines the potential contribution of de-growth theory (*la décroissance*) to the reconceptualisation of development ethics. The recent trend of the study of development ethics shifted from the modernisation theory that centres its value on economic growth to sustainable human development. Based on Amartya Sen's capability approach, sustainable human development aims at the enhancement of the opportunity of people's choices in the given socio-economic situations. The idea of capability is supplemented by another normative ground, human security. From UNDP's *Human Development Report 1994* to Ogata/ Sen's report *Human Security Now!* (2003), the conventional human security discourse argues that human security serves as a pivotal condition for the survival of the suffering people by shifting the modern paradigm of security from a state-centric one to a people-centred one. However, a critical analysis of the human security discourse shows that the economic security prescribed by UNDP and Ogata and Sen is still based on the model of growth-based economy and that it can deteriorate the security of people's concrete lives if it is applied without taking into account the embedded nature of human life in local ecology. Drawing upon the case of anti-nuclear plant movement in Iwaihima Island in Yamaguchi Prefecture (Japan), the paper argues for the necessity of reconceptualising human security in ways the universal exigencies of the security of material well-being are separated from the modernist conception of economic security. The paper concludes that Serge Latouche's de-growth theory contributes to reframing human security and sustainable human development, based on the recognition of diverse material cultures.

### **1. The Contribution of Sen's Capability Approach to Development Ethics**

Since its inception, the academic discipline of development ethics has contributed to examining normative orientations of theories and practices of international development projects. In particular Amartya Sen's capability approaches have opened up a new horizon of development ethics by shifting the goal of development from economic growth to the expansion of human freedom (Sen 1999). Widely recognised as the 'human development' paradigm in the policy debate of international development, the capability approaches are in many senses corrective to conventional development economics. First, in breaking with the hypothesis of welfare economics that centres on utility maximization of rational economic man, Sen's theory acknowledges a plurality of human needs, economic and non-economic, which differ according to societies. Second, the capability approaches reconceptualise human well-being by introducing two mutually complementary categories: functionings and capabilities. The former refers to 'the various things a person may value doing or being' and the latter 'the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve' (ibid: 75). Human development must aim at the enhancement of these two dimensions constitutive of each and every individual. The third point is the role of institutions. The functionings and capabilities, according to

Sen, are enhanced with the improvement of social institutions. Hence development projects need to provide various institutional arrangements such as the access to water and primary education in ways the capabilities of most needed individuals are enhanced. Fourth, Sen also stresses the role of agency. The institutional change of society needs to proceed through the participation of the people concerned: democracy is essential to human development.

It is undoubtedly clear that Sen's theory has broadened the landscape of development ethics by bringing moral philosophy back into the central concern of developmental philosophy. His emphasis on deliberation and participation has also contributed to changing the status of the poor from the passive subject of development aid to the active agent of social change.

The evaluation of Sen's work oscillates, however, when we examine his position to the Enlightenment tradition of modernity, especially that of liberalism. Some critics argue, for example, that Sen's theory, despite its important contribution to development ethics, remains reformist in international development and UNDP's policies provide little fundamental change to neoliberal orthodoxy in the actual development politics (Payne 2004: 99-100). Yet a careful reading of his recent work shows that his ethics provides an internal critique of modernity and even suggests the potential transformation of the ethos of liberalism.

In his *The Idea of Justice* (2009), Sen identifies two traditions of the Enlightenment philosophy of the modern Europe. One is the tradition of 'transcendental institutionalism' that originated in social contract theory and developed through Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant and John Rawls. Another is the tradition of 'social realization' whose membership varies from Adam Smith, Marquis de Condorcet, Jeremy Bentham and Mary Wollstonecraft to Karl Marx and John Stuart Mills (*ibid.* introduction). Sen remarks that, whilst the first constitutes the mainstream paradigm of liberalism, the second has been relatively marginalised in the debate on the social design of the modern age. He problematizes transcendental institutionalism, for it risks subsuming the possibility of human practices under actual/ ideal institutional arrangements and hence impedes the flourishing of a person's capability. Therefore he suggests the shift of focus from transcendental institutionalism to the social realization that centres its value on the role of human agency without assuming the *a priori* institutional constraints.

Sen goes on to say that, once this shift is accepted, it is possible to find the common ground of Enlightenment beyond the horizon of modern Western civilization. He refers to the early teaching of Gautama Buddha and the Hindu philosophy of Krishna as those belonging to the Enlightenment school of social realisation, and indicates the possibility that justice and responsibility are reconceptualised from the cross-cultural/ cross-civilisational perspectives.

Sen's critical re-interpretation of the modern Enlightenment thought suggests the

following things. First, Sen's ethics of development has a potential to transform the culture of modernity from within. By bringing the issue of social realization to the fore, his work attempts to deepen the ethos of modern liberalism beyond the horizon of Western civilization. Second, on the conceptual level, Sen's notion of development is not to be seen as a type of social engineering that is often criticized by post-development thinkers. 'Development' for Sen refers to the process of social realisation. By rejecting transcendental institutionalism and by demonstrating the cross-cultural understanding of Enlightenment, Sen proposes the possibility that 'development' as an empowering process of social realisation is achieved beyond the prevailing institutional designs of international development projects.

## **2. The Centrality of Human Security in Sustainable Human Development**

Once we adopt Sen's position to the Enlightenment as social realization, we can better interpret the norms of UNDP's programmes of human development. In *Human Development Report 1994*, UNDP introduces a concept of sustainable human development, which refers to a development that permits human flourishing for generations. The concept explains the way in which the idea of sustainability strengthens that of the enhancement of human capability. The report states that human development is to be projected in the intergenerational and intra-generational frameworks and the environmental sustainability is a precondition for this aim.

Another important aspect is that the report introduced human security as a foundation of sustainable human development. The idea of human security has a progressive dimension, for it implies the transformation of the grammar of modern politics by shifting the emphasis from state-centred to people-centred. Therefore, liberal left political theorist Mushakoji argues that human security opens up a new epistemological space that illuminates marginal issues in society which otherwise remain invisible in the modern national security framework, e.g. informal economy, illegal migration, human trafficking, and refugee (Mushakoji 2009).

For our concern, it should be noted that the shift of priority from national security to human security is conceived of as that which corresponds to Sen's move from transcendental institutionalism to social realization. Since Hobbes, the modern security discourse has given exclusive priority to the security of the state that is purported to protect the lives of its members. It has been thought that the state is responsible for establishing solid institutions to promote the freedom from fear and the freedom from want. Hence the wars against external enemy and mass poverty were justified as a responsibility of the state for its members. Yet this also means that the realization of people's life goals was guaranteed only insofar as they were fitted into the established norms of political institutions. This is the reason why philosophers like Foucault and Illich see in the modern state the effects that normalize people's ways of living and hence

delimit the possibility of human freedom.

In contradistinction to the traditional idea of national security, human security, like Sen's capability approaches, shifts the emphasis from institutions to social realization. In human security, the security of people is measured in terms of what a person can value doing or being. UNDP (1994) introduces sub-categories such as food security, water security, environmental security, social security, economic security, political security and community security. They are utilised to identify the insecurities that people face, for instance income inequality, unemployment, discrimination, and pollution. These various dimensions of human security are seen as those that serve as the conditions of social realization of each and every human being, hence sustainable human development. It can be said that both discourses of human security and sustainable human development, if taken seriously, have a potential to transform the conventional modernist projects of development, those based on the grammar of transcendental institutionalism, to the universal projects of social realization of each and every particular human being.

It follows therefore that insofar as their *normative cores* are concerned, *both human security and sustainable human development become the preconditions of the transition to a post-development paradigm*. They contribute to cultivating post-development subjectivities within the existing field of international development, calling into questions the existing modernist development institutions and radicalizing the projects of social realization. The task of post-development is not to reject them *in toto* but to seek *a possible articulation with their normative discourses* while criticizing the actual policies of human development that, according to Arturo Escobar (2010), still remains a 'neo-developmental' project.

### 3. The Limits of Economic Security

Although sustainable human development has a potential of introducing a progressive transformation of the ethos of modernist development projects, it is still far from being compatible with post-development paradigm. This incompatibility gives a strange impression to those who are familiar with the ethical foundations of both theories. As is well known, Amartya Sen's capability approaches, the theoretical foundation of sustainable human development, owe much to Aristotle's ethics of human flourishing. Similarly, the post-development thought elaborated by Serge Latouche also subscribes to the Aristotelian ethics of *phronesis* as well as to Illich's ethics of conviviality and Hannah Arendt's political philosophy. Both Sen and Latouche define the goal of societal transformation as social realization and stress the importance of practical ethics in organising collective life. They commonly acknowledge the plurality of human reasoning and human needs and introduce new concept of justice in delimiting the force of free market economy. However, Latouche (2003) takes distance from Sen's theory, as the latter does not still overcome the modern paradigms of the economy and development.

One may ask, then: What is the factor that divides sustainable human development and

post-development so fundamentally? The central problem of sustainable human development lies in its conception of human security. As already discussed, one cannot deny the importance of human security insofar as she acknowledges the significance of social realization. Security of each and every human being is necessary to guarantee the possibility of enriching their life chances. In this sense the idea of human security *per se* is legitimate as a universal life claim. However, one faces a contradiction when human security prescribes economic security as one of its requisites. We shall look at both UNDP's *Human Development Report 1994* and Ogata/ Sen's *Human Security Now!* (2003).

To begin with, UNDP refers to economic security as the assurance of basic income that comes from productive and remunerative work or from some publicly financed safety net (UNDP 1994: 25). Then it attributes economic insecurity to various factors including the low GDP growth rate, precarious labour market, unemployment and income inequality in the domestic context as well as disparities in global economic opportunities. As a solution, UNDP stresses the necessity of ensuring that economic growth is broadly based in order to distribute economic opportunities to the greatest number of people (*ibid.*: 39). In short, in the framework of UNDP, the growth-based economy is thought of as *the* foundation of material security of the modern human societies.

The same logic is also found in Ogata/ Sen's report on human security. The chapter five of *Human Security Now!* (2003) states that economic growth is essential for reducing income poverty and contributes to meeting the poverty reduction criteria of Millennium Development Goals (CHS 2003: 75). The report proposes to combine economic growth with the institutional arrangements that enforce fair distribution of economic opportunities, sustainable livelihoods and wide range of social protections, suggesting that the assurance of economic security goes hand in hand with that of social and environmental securities. Although the report balances the claim for economic growth with other social and environmental issues, it is still assumed that the material well-being of humans is guaranteed through a just arrangement of growth-based economy. In other words, the discourse of economic security presumes that the material well-being is the domain that is to be dealt with primarily by the modern systems of production, exchange and distribution.

Such conception of economic security contains an epistemological problem because it implicitly excludes the dimensions of ecology and culture from the conceptualisation of material life. In the prevailing economic security discourse, ecology and culture are treated at best as *external* institutions/ domains that, in essence, do not undermine the autonomy of the epistemological system of economic sciences entwined with the modern techno-scientific discourse. Therefore the economic security is unable to represent the forms of material life that are based on different cosmologies from the modern economic and techno-scientific paradigms. It conceals the very possibility that the attempt at securing the material well-being of some by means of growth-based economy jeopardises

that of others.

The case of anti-nuclear plant movement at Iwaishima Island of Yamaguchi Prefecture, Japan, demonstrates such contradiction of economic security. The residents of this small island in the Setonaikai Sea have been opposing to the construction of one of the largest nuclear plants to the coast of their neighbour island Nagashima since 1982. They have been organising a solitary protest as their Kaminoseki-cho municipal government accepted the plan. The protest is still continuing even after the Yamaguchi prefectural government issued the Chugoku electric energy company the permission for the land-filling work of the planed area in October, 2008.

This longstanding protest, principally organised for protecting their life world, can be said to constitute a unique understanding of human security. First, the Iwaishima residents, whose majorities are aged organic farmers and fishermen, resist the construction plan to defend the activities of organic farming and fishery. These activities are essential to their lives not merely for income security but also for sustaining their communal bonds that have been reproduced for generations. Second, the protest is organised to defend the symbolic space of their life world. The landscape made of shrines, forests and seashores has long since constituted the essential part of the culture of Iwaishima. The residents are claiming that the construction of nuclear plant would destroy these sites indispensable for their cultural practices. Third, the Iwaishima residents are concerned with the security of local ecology. The surrounding sea area is rich in biodiversity that allows the survival of several endangered marine species. The residents fear that these species might be extinguished in the process of construction and through the change of sea temperature in using the nuclear plant. Fourth and the last, the residents fear the security of their lives. Iwaishima is geographically isolated from the mainland Yamaguchi prefecture and they cannot escape if the accident happens.

The security concerns of the Iwashima residents are therefore incommensurable to the economic security discourse that centres its value on income security by means of economic growth. The material life of the Iwaishima people is embedded in local culture and local ecology and is reducible neither to income security nor to any other economic calculation of interests. Moreover, the case of Iwaishima shows the extent to which the complex of productivist-consumerist ideologies in Japan in fact violate the human security of Iwaishima island, justifying the excessive energy consumption for corporate activities and 'decent' consumer life. This violation of human security is exercised not only on political and economic levels but also on the epistemological level. The singularity of the shared conception of material life among the Iwaishima people is made invisible in the generality of the norms of Japanese society that privileges growth-based economy. The discourse of economic security, insofar as it centres on the modern economic paradigm, can violate the human security based on a different conception of material life; hence it excludes the possibility of social realization of those who live outside the modern economic paradigm.

#### 4. **Reconceptualising the Security of Material Well-Being Through De-growth**

For human security to be deemed a universal value, it is imperative to tackle the paradox of economic security. It is not sufficient to regulate growth-based economy with a set of institutions as the conventional human security literature does, for the problem lies not so much in the institutional levels as in the epistemological level. What is needed, therefore, is *to separate the universal exigencies of the security of material well-being from the modernist conception of economic security*.

The modern Enlightenment tradition of social realization, particularly that of liberal tradition, is correct in including the universal concern for decent life in the conditions of human survival. However, it mistakenly assumes that growth-based economy is the universally applicable institution to realize material well-being of all humanity.

The central problem of this view lies in the *paradigm* that establishes the idea of wealth creation. As Latouche's work demonstrates, the institutionalisation of modern political economy proceeded with the radical transformation of the symbolic order of human society through the modern sciences and technology (Latouche 1973, 1995, 2005). The modern sciences transformed the relationship between human and nature by introducing the binary of subject and object. The subjectivity of human being is separated from the world of objects, and human activities are disembedded from the surrounding ecological space. This modernist worldview transformed nature into the resources for commodity production and legitimized its governance and exploitation through the application of the modern scientific technology. The economy as we know it today is inseparable from this generalisation of the modern scientific epistemology and the technological governance of the world. The economy forecloses other ways of symbolising our social existence and hence the uniformisation of the sense of the world, as Latouche remarks.

We need to acknowledge various forms of material life outside the discursive space of the modern economic sciences and to symbolise them as a legitimate human life. The recognition of the plurality of material cultures and the re-valorisation of local/indigenous knowledge are the exigencies commonly found in the post-development literature (Escobar 1995, 2009; Esteva and Prakash 1998; Shiva 2005) as well as in the literature of Asian and Latin American subaltern and post-colonial studies (Chakrabarty 2008; Mignolo 2000). These authors and activists explore the reactivation of autonomy of the people excluded from modernity, development and globalisation by producing alternative knowledge to that of the modern Western economy and sciences. For these authors, justice is not a matter of fair distribution of economic opportunities but to give dignity, recognition, and legitimacy to the singularity of material cultures of people in the South. Such an exigency of justice exactly coincides with that of the residents of the Iwaishima island. All these cases demonstrate that the materiality of life is embedded in local culture and local ecology and that it is irreducible to the generality of the economic paradigm entwined with the modern techno-scientific discourses. It follows that the

security of material well-being, if it is deemed a universal claim, must respond to these singular and plural experiences of material cultures, rather than promoting the modernist economic security. The entire framework of human security, therefore, needs to be reformulated on this pluralist conception of material well-being.

The deconstruction of the modern economic paradigm and the recognition of the diversity of material cultures are the condition *sine qua non* for cultivating the pathway to a global civilisation of social realization. Sen is right in reconceptualising development from a perspective of social realization: 'development is fundamentally an empowering process, and this power can be used to preserve and enrich the environment, not only to decimate it' (Sen 2009: 249). However, his position becomes ambiguous when he faces the question concerning *the meaning of the economy*. Sen's theory is still unable to answer the issue of how to respond to the *alterity* of the modern economic paradigm, i.e. how to cultivate the social realisation of those whose material cultures are at risk in the very presence of the modern economy. De-growth theory challenges this dilemma. It provides a critical reflection on the historical trajectory of the modern industrial society, calls into questions the conceptual framework of the modern political economy, and valorises and re-organises various social activities outside the economic paradigm, as Latouche (2006) shows in his 'virtuous cycles of 8R'. De-growth also transforms the meaning of production, exchange and consumption on the global scale and introduces new sense of justice that permits the coexistence of diverse material cultures.

The task of de-growth is therefore not to reject the norms of human security and sustainable human development but to reconstruct them through the lens of new conceptions of life, wealth, and society. This not only deepens the sense of development *qua* social realization but also gives de-growth a broader institutional basis to extend its ideas to a global arena. It is argued therefore that, ultimately, the articulation of human security, sustainable human development and de-growth contributes to bringing concrete visions of post-development to light.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper examined the contribution of de-growth theory to changing the conceptual framework of human security and sustainable human development. The emphasis on social realisation is found in both Sen's and Latouche's works. However they differ in their evaluation of the epistemological status of the modern economy. Latouche's philosophy of post-development, together with de-growth theory, illuminates the paradox of the modernist conception of economic security and opens up a new epistemological space that recognises diverse modes of material cultures. Therefore it contributes to reconceptualising human security and the sustainable human development that centres its value on human security, based on the pluralist conception of the security of material well-being. Post-development and de-growth are not a simple rejection of the modern

Enlightenment philosophy but a transformation of the ethos of modernity through the re-valorisation of the alterity of the paradigm of development and the economy. It is a possible option that the critical articulation of post-development/ de-growth with sustainable human development contributes to overcoming the paradigms of development and economy and opens up a path toward the construction of a profound civilisation of social realisation of each and every human being, which respects the plurality of material cultures. The modern Enlightenment philosophy and liberalism will experience a great transformation of its meaning when they accept this proposition.

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